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ABSTRACT

Two assertions regarding the Regular Education Initiative (REI) are presented: (1) general educators are not willing to serve students with handicaps, and (2) general educators are not competent to serve students with handicaps. Illinois general education teachers (N=314) were surveyed to examine their attitudes and perceived ability to work with students with handicaps. Findings showed that, as a group, respondents were willing to teach students who were gifted and students with physical handicaps, but were not willing to teach students with mental handicaps. Teachers indicated a self-perceived lack of skills in teaching students labeled severely/profoundly handicapped, severely emotionally disturbed, and visually impaired. Teachers felt confident in their abilities to work with parents, provide individual assistance, adapt materials, participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) conferences, adapt curriculum, and manage behaviors. They were not confident in their abilities to write behavioral objectives, interpret assessment results, and write IEPs. Teachers' preferences for resources necessary to facilitate integration, in rank order, were special materials, classroom aides, consultation with special educators, inservice training in behavior management, more "hands-on" experience, more compensation, and college course work in special education. Includes 23 references. (JDD)

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REI: The Will and Skill of Regular Educators

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ABSTRACT

Two assertions regarding the Regular Education Initiative (REI) are that general educators have neither the willingness nor the competence to serve students with handicaps. Illinois educators (N=314) were surveyed to examine their attitudes and perceived ability to work with students with handicaps. Teachers ranked specific types of resources necessary to facilitate integration of students with handicaps. Selected survey findings are presented and implications for special education teacher educators are discussed.

REI: The Will and Skill of Regular Educators

The Regular Education Initiative (REI) has been one of the most controversial topics in special education the past several years. Advocates and opponents have argued the merits of this proposed service delivery system in the professional literature and at professional conferences. However, while the REI has generated much rhetoric, little empirical evidence regarding many of its underlying assumptions has been gathered (Keogh, 1988; McKinney & Hocutt, 1988). Of particular concern for teacher educators are questions relative to the most effective means of providing training programs for both regular and special educators to insure that the needs of students with handicaps are met.

Proponents of the REI have noted a number of factors which seemingly support the notion that the "general education system [should] assume unequivocal, primary responsibilty for all students in our public schools" (Davis, 1989, p.440). Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg (1986, 1988) have called attention to the fragmentation and lack of coordination of programs for the diversity of students with special needs, the loss of program control by school administrators in conjunction with excessive regulatory requirements, lack of incentives for program improvement, and the flawed classification and placement systems. Lilly (1988) and Shepard (1987) have maintained that the differences between special and general education services,

especially for students identified as mildy handicapped, are "relatively meaningless." In short, the current educational system for children with handicaps is perceived by some to be ineffective, nonfunctional, and overly expensive.

To combat this ineffective system, different alternatives have been forwarded. Stainback and Stainback (1987) proposed the merger of special and regular education into one, unified system; Lilly (1982, 1986) has articulated a system with less labelling and segregation and more cooperation, while Wang, Reynolds and colleagues (1984, 1986, 1988, 1989) have fashioned the most elaborate alternative based essentially upon the Adaptive Learning Environment Model(ALEM). While the REI proposals form a continuum in terms of recommended changes in the service delivery system, there is consensus that regular educators are to have primary instructional responsibility for students with mild handicaps.

However, Lieberman (1985) declared that the REI was akin to a shotgun wedding in which the bride (regular educators) had not been consulted; he concluded that general educators were not willing to participate in such a marriage. Mesinger (1985) maintained that general educators typically were not competent enough to effectively carry out the REI. The twin issues of general educators' willingness and skill regarding adoption of REI also have been addressed by Kauffman, 1989; O'Neil, 1988; and Singer, 1988.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived will and skill of Illinois regular educators to integrate students with handicaps into their classrooms. Illinois educators were an important population to survey given that

in 1988, Illinois ranked fifth highest nationally in the number of students receiving services in segregated settings, or through "pull-out programs"; approximately 42% of the students identified as handicapped were labelled LD (or mildly handicapped) and one in every five students were receiving special services in some districts (RIMIS, 1988). Further, key state board special education administrators were advocating a hybrid version of the REI known as "The Illinois Initiative: Partnerships for Achievement."

Method

Subjects

The subjects were general education teachers in four Illinois school districts (one from urban Chicago, one from the Chicago suburbs, and two from rural areas). The typical respondent was a female in her 40's with a master's degree and 16 or more years of experience. She was certified, tenured, had 21 to 25 students in class, and indicated previous experience in working with students with handicaps. Further demographic information is available from the first author.

Procedures

In January of 1989, four superintendents who had previously expressed interest in the REI issue were sent instructions and a packet of 30-question surveys (a copy of the survey is available from the first author). The surveys asked the respondents to rate their willingness to have students with handicaps in their classrooms and to rate their skills at providing services for these students. A 5-point Likert scale was used. In addition, they ranked a number of

specific types of support/resources that would enable them to teach students with handicaps in their classrooms. Upon receipt of the surveys, the superintendents forwarded them to local principals who, in turn, distributed the surveys to their teachers. An attached cover letter provided the rationale for the questionnaire and instructions on completion. The principals collected the completed surveys and returned them to the researchers. Of the 1,012 surveys sent, 314 were returned, a 31% response.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean ratings for items dealing with teacher's willingness and capacity to work with students identified as handicapped. As a group, the respondents were willing to teach students that were gifted and students who had physical handicaps, but were not willing to teach students with mental handicaps. When questioned regarding their skill to integrate students with handicaps, teachers indicated a self-perceived lack of skills in each area of exceptionality. Particularly, they indicated a lack of skills in teaching students labelled severely/profoundly handicapped, severely emotionally disturbed, and visually impaired. They did feel that they could successfully integrate students who were identified as gifted.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

To handle, successfully, students with handicaps in their classes, the respondents ranked preferences in the following order: (1) special materials, (2) classroom aides, (3)

consultation with special educators, (4) inservices in behavior management and strategies, (5) more "hands-on" experience, (6) more compensation, and (7) college course work in special education. See Table 2 for the mean ratings for each of the items above.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Regarding students with handicapping conditions, teachers felt confident in their abilities to (1) work with parents, (2) provide individual assistance, (3) adapt materials, (4) participate in IEP conferences, (5) adapt curriculum, and (6) manage behaviors. Respondents were not confident in their abilities to write behavioral objectives, interpret assessment results, and write IEP's. See Table 3 for the mean ratings on each of these items.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

As a group, the respondents indicated positive attitudes toward mainstreaming; lowering class size to facilitate integration; administrative support of integration; and use of labelling to obtain special services. They were concerned about high student/teacher ratios, lack of materials, lack of preparation time, and increased paperwork. Mean ratings for these items are found in Table 4.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Data were analyzed using a Chi square, ANOVA, and a Tukey-B follow-up to determine significant relationships at the .05 level. With the exception of one item reported below, there were not any significant differences in the responses of the rural, urban, or suburban teachers. The following four responses were considered statistically significant: (a) teachers in grades 9-12 were more willing to teach students with physical handicaps than teachers in grades K-8; (b) suburban teachers felt more confident than urban and rural teachers in their abilities to interpret assessment results; (c) the less experienced teachers (1-5 years) were more willing to teach students with behavioral disorders than were teachers with 16 or more years of experience: and (d) teachers having experience with students with handicaps are more willing to have students labelled mildly mentally impaired, physically handicapped, speech/language disordered, and hearing impaired in their classrooms than were teachers with no experience with such students. Given space constraints, it is not possible to present findings from the entire survey; complete results are available from the first author.

Discussion

While the results of this study must be considered as tentative, we suggest that there are at least three implications that teacher educators should consider. First, it is simplistic to assert that general educators are not willing to work with students that have handicaps. The type and severity of the handicapping condition appear to mediate

teacher's willingness to work with students having special needs. Our findings are consistent with what Myles and Simpson (1989) reported about Kansas educator's willingness to participate in mainstreaming when involved in the decision-making process. It is important, therefore, that special education teacher educators suspend judgement regarding the willingness of regular educators in the field to teach students with handicaps.

Furthermore, asserting carte' blanc that general educators are not competent to work with students receiving special education services obscures the issue of teacher effectiveness in service delivery. The Illinois teachers indicated that they had a range of competencies in specific areas. These findings may be inferred as support for the efforts that have been made over the past dozen years to provide some initial knowledge and training regarding special education to regular educators (Hartle, 1982; Hoover, 1986; Jones & Messenheimer-Young, 1989). The infusion of special education curriculum into the general education program of studies is bearing fruit and should be continued.

Second, the reported needs of the teachers may reveal something about a common misperception regarding special education. The teacher's indicated a strong desire for specialized materials and strategies in order to work with students with handicaps. Apparently, many teachers still believe that some magical combination of material and instructional strategy is the key to working with the most difficult students. This false notion is debilitating to both teachers and students. Special education teacher

educators must continue their efforts to unveil the unjustified mystique associated with the services that are provided to students with mild handicaps. This recommendation reflects the belief that there are relatively few significant differences between effective regular education programs and most special education teacher training programs(Pugach, 1987).

Third, the general education teachers indicated a desire to consult with other general and special education teachers. This type of collaborative/consultative relationship is one that could be fostered by astute teacher educators both in preservice and inservice training. Careful structuring of classes and activities could be used to develop these skills in all educators, probably resulting in enhanced learning opportunities for all students. An ideal arena within teacher preparation programs would be introductory education courses in which regular and special education pre-teachers jointly participated in practicum experiences involving a diverse range of students. Providing all education majors with "hands-on" experience with students identified as handicapped will require collaboration that might be a step toward the desegregation of teacher training programs. Less professional preciousness among teacher educators is likely to improve educational services for all students.

TABLE 1

Will and Skill to Integrate Students by Category

Group	$\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$
	Willingness	Ability
Gifted	4.37	3.95
Physically handicapped	3.60	2.78
Speech/Lang. Disordered	3.53	2.88
Hearing impaired	3.40	2.52
Visually impaired	3.31	1.82
Mild mentally handicapped	3.10	2.79
Moderate mentally handicapped	2.40	2.17
Behavior disordered	2.10	2.15
Severe emotionally disturbed	1.34	1.38
Severe/profound mentally retarded	1.31	1.31

Note. A 5-point Likert scale was used. 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

TABLE 2

Resources Desired to Promote Integration

Group	$\bar{x}$
Special materials	4.14
Classroom aide	4.05
Consultation with SPE	3.89
Strategies inservice	3.75
Behavior management inservice	3.75
Hands on Experience	3.73
More compensation	3.50
College coursework	3.17

Note. A 5-point Likert scale was used. 1-strong disagree, and 5=strongly agree.

TABLE 3

Confidence in Ability to Perform Specific Duties

Group	$\bar{x}$
Work with parents	3.69
Individualize assistance	3.50
Material adaptation	3.36
IEP conf. participation	3.33
Curriculum adaptation	3.31
Behavior management	3.15
Write behavioral objectives	2.95
Assessment interpretation	2.73
Write IEP	2.27

Note. A 5-point Likert scale was used. 1=strong disagree, and 5=strongly agree.

TABLE 4

Other Variables Influencing Integration

Group	$\bar{x}$
Understands mainstreaming concepts	4.33
Positive attitude re:SPE student	4.30
Lower class size	4.26
More preparation time	3.39
Aware of characteristics	3.81
Labelling is helpful	3.66
Need more materials	3.55
Administrative support lacking	2.23
Paperwork not a problem	2.04

Note. A 5-point Likert scale was used. 1=strongly disagree, and 5=strongly agree.

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